

The Tuareg: A Nation Without Borders?

A CNA Strategic Studies Conference Report

Patricio Asfura-Heim



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The Strategic Studies Division is led by Dr. Eric V. Thompson, who is available at 703-824-2243 or thompsoe@cna.org. The executive assistant to the director is Ms. Rebecca Edelston, at 703-824-2604 or edelstonr@cna.org.

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Ken E. Gause, Research Team Leader
International Affairs Group
CNA Strategic Studies

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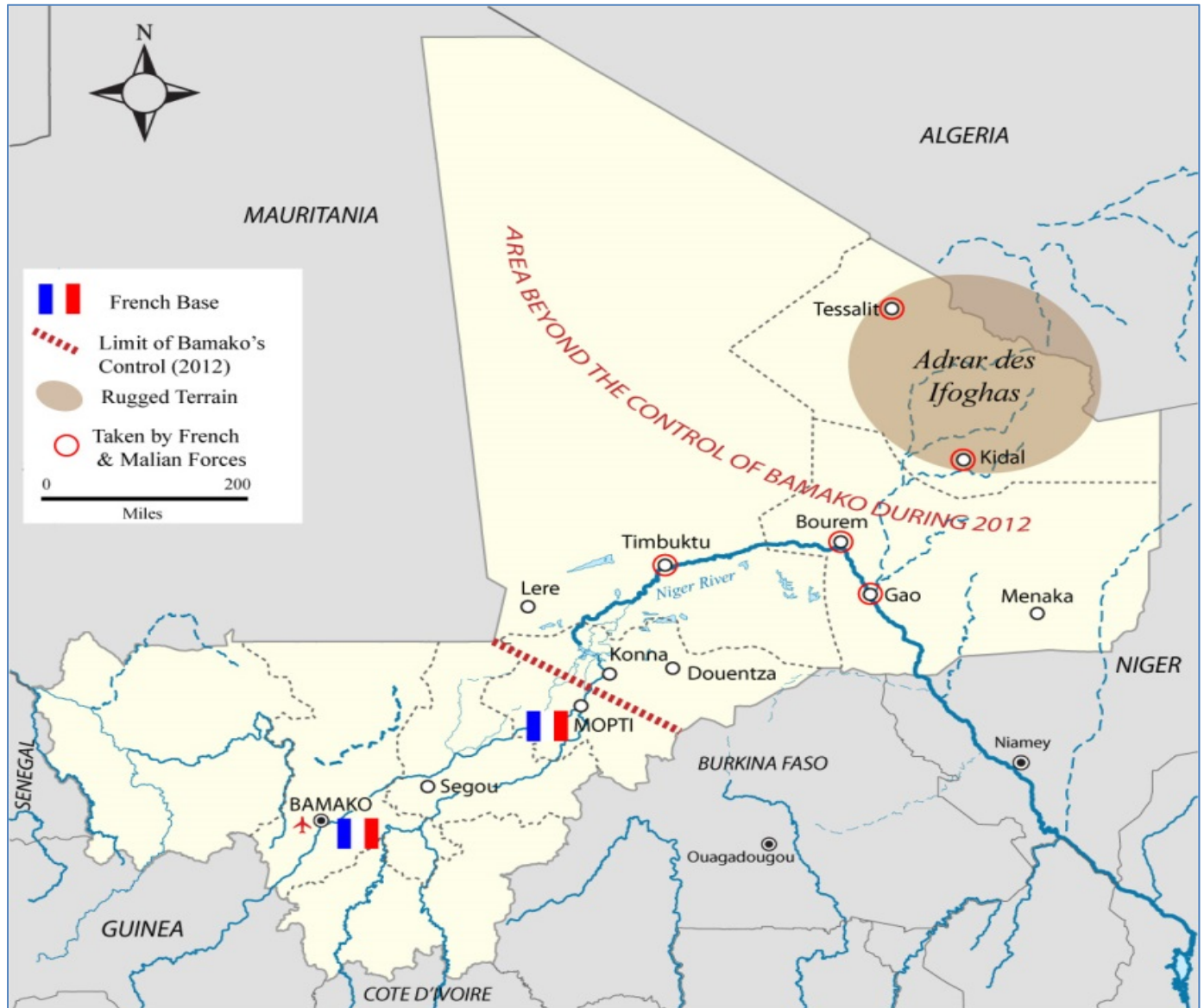
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Contents

Introduction.....	1
Key Findings.....	1
Beyond the veil	3
Tuareg-state relations.....	5
“Azawad, it’s now or never”	6
The ethnic dimension of the Mali crisis.....	8
The effects of the French intervention	8
Prospects for a political settlement.....	9
Recommendations for the international community.....	10

Figure 1. Mali Crisis: Battle lines 2012



Introduction

On the morning of January 17, 2012, a new Tuareg group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), attacked the town of Menaka in northeast Mali. This was the beginning of a full-fledged assault that expelled the Malian government from the north of the country, an area the size of Texas. In the immediate aftermath of the military successes of the MNLA, the more politically astute and ruthless Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine leaders shouldered the MNLA aside to seize control of the struggle. To stem the southward advance of militants, the French military, with the assistance of regional African partners, intervened and quickly cleared the northern cities of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. To avoid being destroyed, the secular MNLA sided with the French against the jihadists. In the intervening months, airstrikes and raids by French and African troops killed scores of jihadi fighters, including several important commanders.

Despite remnants of resistance remaining in mountain and desert hideouts, and a spate of deadly suicide bombings, France has begun to withdraw some of its 4,000 troops in preparation for a transition to a United Nations peacekeeping force. To extirpate AQIM and permanently deny it and other extremist militants sanctuary in the Sahara, the cooperation of the Tuareg people will be essential. What has yet to be determined is how the Tuareg can be integrated into a peaceful and effective political process.

On March 22, 2013, CNA's Center for Strategic Studies convened a small group discussion to identify Tuareg aspirations and examine post-conflict political dynamics in Mali. The meeting brought together noted academics, journalists, and experts from the United States and abroad.

Key findings

- **The Tuareg are a culturally unique people and have a valid claim to “ethnic specificity.”** An ethnic branch of the Berbers, the Tuareg are culturally and linguistically unique. Despite strong tribal and caste divisions, they maintain a strong sense of identity and shared history. Their total population, which is

spread across several countries in central Sahara and the Sahel, is estimated to be between 1.2 and 3 million members.

- **The Tuareg have legitimate grievances, but so do other minority groups in the region.** Historically, the Tuareg have had poor relations with state governments. They claim that they have been systematically marginalized, both politically and economically. Since Mali and Niger gained their independence from France in 1960, the Tuareg there have mounted four secessionist rebellions. The 2012 rebellion, in part due to past grievances, was sparked by an opportunity created by an influx of fighters and weaponry and the restructuring of Tuareg clan politics.
- **There is no pan-Tuareg movement.** The Tuareg do not speak with one voice. They are divided along tribal, generational, and ideological lines, and there is no consensus on the need to establish a separate Tuareg state. The MNLA, which initially led the 2012 Mali revolt and now controls territory in the north, represents only a minority of the Tuareg and is blamed by many for the poor circumstances in which they now find themselves.
- **Ethnic animosities could keep the war going even after militants have been neutralized.** Power in Mali is largely in the hands of the Bambara ethnic group, which has traditionally dominated the Malian Army. Ordinary Tuaregs are fleeing major cities such as Timbuktu and Bamako en masse, fearing retribution by majority “black African” ethnic groups.
- **There is a great deal of pessimism about the prospects for the Malian government and about the negotiation of a political settlement that would alleviate the Tuareg problem.** Existing divisions with Malian society make the prospects for negotiating and implementing a peace accord slim. French assistance to the Malian government may backfire by reducing incentives to enter into meaningful negotiations with the Tuareg. France’s dependence on the MNLA to secure the upper reaches of the country may complicate Bamako’s claims to sovereignty in the north. While the key to stability in Mali is rooted in better and more effective governance, elections in the near term could result in more harm than good.

Beyond the veil

Western literature and media have often portrayed the Tuareg, or the “people of the veil” as they are often called, in quaint and romanticized terms. In the 1920s, the Tuareg were introduced to Western mainstream consciousness as the tribal warriors who battled the French Foreign Legion in P.C. Wren’s adventure novel, *Beau Geste*. Despite the attention they have received in literature and popular media, or perhaps because of it, the Tuareg as a people remain largely misunderstood.

The Tuareg are an ethnic branch of the Berbers but also have members of Arab and black African ancestry. Often referred to as the “Kurds of the Sahel,” they are a stateless people with their own language and culture, spread across several countries in central Sahara and the Sahel. The Tuareg people have historical connections to the Fezzan region in Libya, from which they immigrated in the 12th and 14th centuries. They are descendants of the tribes who resisted the Arab conquest of North Africa by retreating into the desert and mountain strongholds in the Adrar des Ifogas (Mali), the Air (Niger), and the Hoggar (Algeria). Until the 20th century, they remained largely nomadic, and made their living controlling the caravan trade across the Sahara.

When African countries achieved independence, the Tuareg homeland was divided among the states that emerged. Today, the Tuareg occupy parts of the modern nation states of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria, and Libya (an area of approximately 1.5 million square miles), where they remain ethnic minorities. A small number of Tuareg have maintained their nomadic traditions, moving across national borders, but most are now settled. The total population is estimated to be between 1.2 and 3 million. The largest concentrations are in northern Niger and Mali, where they constitute approximately 10 percent of the national populations. The Tuareg live in sparse, arid, and unforgiving areas. Their lands are among the poorest in the world, and, as a result, they often suffer from chronic food insecurity.

Tuareg society is particularly hierarchical and is split by a number of political, class, and racial divisions. Social organization consists of tribes and clans, many of which belong to larger, transnational confederations called *ettebel* or “drum groups.” There are from 9 to 11

ettebel groups, each with a separate socio-political organization. Within tribal groupings, individuals belong to a variety of castes which further separate “noble” and “vassal” elements of Tuareg society. Skin color, which varies greatly among Tuareg groups, is an additional division within the cultural hierarchy. In the north of Mali, for example, the Kel Adagh (aka Kel Ifoghas) is the predominant tribal confederation and has a ruling class made up, partly, of Tuareg of Arab ancestry.

Figure 2. Tuareg confederations



The Tuareg’s segmentary lineage system, their complex caste structure, and the intervention of outside powers have prevented stable political relationships across Tuareg confederations. Only rarely have neighboring confederations formed military alliances to fight common enemies. In the late 19th century, for example, the French were able to conquer the Sahara by exacerbating divisions within Tuareg society and turning tribal leaders against each other.

Despite their divisions, there is a strong sense of solidarity and shared identity among the Tuareg, who see themselves as very different from

neighboring peoples. Language and religion have traditionally been key links. The Tuareg speak a Saharan cluster of closely related dialects of a southern Berber language group (Tamasheq, Tamajeq, Tamahaq), which, while different, are mutually intelligible. Tuareg are mainly Sunni Muslims. Sufism is particularly prevalent among the sedentary Tuareg communities, as is a strong tradition of pre-Islamic beliefs.

Tuareg-state relations

Like many other minority ethnic groups in North Africa and the Sahel, the Tuareg claim a variety of economic, social, and political grievances. Competition for resources has often led to conflicts between the Tuareg and neighboring ethnic groups. Since their forced inclusion into post-colonial states, the Tuareg claim that they have been systematically marginalized. They assert that government intervention and development projects have disturbed their pastoral lifestyle and reduced their access to livelihoods. With few employment options, and facing drought and starvation, many Tuareg from Mali and Niger found employment as mercenaries for the Qadhafi regime in the 1970s and 1980s.

Since Mali and Niger gained their independence from France in 1960, the Tuareg there have mounted four unsuccessful secessionist rebellions. From the Tuareg point of view, settlements of prior conflicts, particularly in Mali, have never been satisfactory. Subsequent rebellions are perceived to be the result of governments' failures to honor their commitments to peace agreements (such as the National Pact of 1992 and the Algiers Accord of 2006). Further complicating Tuareg-state relations are accusations that governments were responsible for war crimes against the Tuareg during the rebellions. More recently, the governments of Algeria, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania have all used the pretext of the Global War on Terror to crack down on ethnic minorities, including the Tuareg.

Tuareg grievances and the desire for nationhood by some factions should not be mistaken for a true pan-Tuareg movement. The MNLA in Mali is not fighting for its fellow Tuareg in Niger. In another example, one of the Malian government's most successful generals fighting the secessionist rebels has been General El Hadj Gamou, a Tuareg from a vassal tribe with a disdain for the noble tribes in the

north. While the Tuareg are not unified in a desire for independence, most do want increased representation, a degree of political autonomy, and the recognition of their cultural and ethnic identity. In Niger, they also demand a share of benefits from the exploitation of the country's natural resources.

“Azawad, it's now or never”

In December 2011, Tuareg leader Bilal Ag Cherif returned to Mali from Libya with experienced fighters and an arsenal of sophisticated weaponry to again take up the struggle for Tuareg independence under the banner of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad. Discontent in the north, however, was brewing long before their arrival. Though the Libyan revolution speeded up the process, developments in Mali would have likely led to a Tuareg revolt sooner or later. While the latest bid for Tuareg independence was indeed rooted in longstanding grievances, the rebellion was not the result of an accumulation of past injustices. Instead, the crisis was sparked by a sense that a new window of opportunity for Tuareg statehood had been opened. Many Tuareg in north Mali felt that the geo-political climate for the Azawad cause was favorable and the time to strike was right.

Factions within the Tuareg community in northern Mali chose to fight in early 2012 because they found themselves flush with newly arrived fighters and weaponry from Libya. In contrast to previous Tuareg revolts, the MNLA had assembled one of the most impressive arsenals ever seen in Mali. Like the French, the Malian government had managed to control the north by playing tribal leaders against each other and supporting vassal clans against the nobility. The arrival of new men and materiel in autumn 2011 changed the strategic calculus of feuding clan leaders. The political equilibrium between rival clans in the north tipped in favor of the groups that had been on the losing side of the Malian government's divide-and-rule policies. Once the revolt started, the secular MNLA and its jihadist allies took advantage of the Malian government's weakness following the military coup d'état in March 2012 (itself sparked by the renewed conflict), and conquered the whole of the north in short order.

Main anti-government groups

Several groups with distinct origins, ideologies, and leadership have fought against the Malian government. Broadly, they fall into two categories: the secular Tuareg rebels who fought against the Malian government to create an independent state in “Azawad,” and jihadi groups of mixed ethnicity and nationality engaged in a violent struggle to establish a sharia state. Individual fighters have shifted back and forth across the two categories. Some estimate the numbers of trained fighters to be as high as 6,000. Many of those fighters have now retreated to bases in the Adrar des Ifoghas mountains; others have gone to Niger, Libya, and elsewhere.

1. Tuareg rebels:

The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) is a secular, ethno-nationalist movement. While rhetorically the MNLA has been inclusive of other ethnic groups in north Mali, it is still generally seen as a Tuareg movement that seeks an independent homeland for Tuareg in Azawad (north Mali). It was created in September 2011 and is led by Bilal Ag Cherif, a Tuareg and former soldier in the Libyan military. The MNLA leadership has rescinded claims for an independent state but continues to insist on guarantees of autonomy. The MNLA is made up of a variety of Tuareg factions, including former Libyan soldiers, separatists who fought the Malian government in 2006, youth from the National Movement of the Azawad (MNA), and experienced Tuareg politicians. The MNLA now holds territory in the northernmost areas of the country.

2. Jihadist groups:

Ansar Dine is a jihadist group composed largely of Tuareg. It is led by Iyad ag Ghali of the Ifogha confederation, a key figure in the Tuareg rebellions of the 1990s. Ansar Dine, meaning “Defenders of the Faith,” seeks to impose sharia law across Mali. The group believes that only its Salafi ideology can unify the various Tuareg clans and other ethnic groups and bring peace to Mali. Its military victories led to the defection of a core of experienced MNLA fighters.

Movement for Divine Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) is a jihadist group composed mostly of southern Saharans who broke away from AQIM in December 2011. Because its leader, Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, is Mauritanian, MUJWA is generally seen as a foreign organization. However, several of its most prominent members are Malian nationals, mainly Lamhar Arabs. The MUJWA have developed a reputation for using car bombs and have stated that they intend to conduct suicide attacks in Mali’s capital as well as the capitals of other African nations whose troops are fighting in Mali. It is believed to be heavily funded by drug and ransom money, and some observers speculate that the group may in essence be little more than a front for criminal activities.

Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is a Mali-based Islamist militant organization that aims to overthrow the Algerian government and institute an Islamic state. Formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), AQIM was created in September 2006 after the dissolution of the GSPC, which itself evolved out of the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA). Although its roots are Algerian, AQIM was present in the Malian Sahara for several years before the 2012 revolt. In 2012, AQIM units supported Ansar Dine and MUJAO but allowed them to remain the public face of jihad in Mali.

The ethnic dimension of the Mali crisis

As in past rebellions in Mali, an ethnic backlash erupted after clearing operations commenced in the north. The Malian Army is suspected of torture, summary execution of prisoners, and recriminations against alleged collaborators. What began as a separatist campaign now threatens to spiral into an ethnic-based conflict between “white” Tuareg and Arabs and “black” Africans. Even around traditional territories such as Timbuktu, Tuareg no longer feel safe. Tens of thousands of Tuareg from throughout the country have sought protection from the fighting and revenge attacks by fleeing to refugee camps in Mauritania and elsewhere. Most Tuareg leaders, among them members of parliament, have fled the capital for fear of reprisals.

Ethnic tensions in north Mali were already running high before the crisis, fueled by accelerating desertification and the scarcity of irrigated land. Most of Mali’s resources are in the fertile south, which is populated by the politically dominant Mandé people (a collection of West African ethnic groups including the Bambara, Malinke, and Sarakole). The Bambara are the largest single ethnic group in Mali and have dominated the country politically since independence. Some in Bamako say that once the French military leaves, the government will launch a revenge campaign to destroy the Tuareg in the north. The threat is taken seriously by many Tuareg. In the mid-1990s the Malian government formed the Ganday Koy, a Songhai militia whose main purpose was to terrorize minority communities in the north.

The effects of the French intervention

The French intervention in Mali has had a number of effects, both military and political. The French have inflicted heavy losses on the jihadists, and their assault has succeeded in fragmenting the groups along identity, ethnic, and tribal lines. The remnants of these groups have now begun to disperse to other countries across North Africa — in particular, to southern Libya, where the state has little control.

Surprised by the lack of government capacity and general lack of commitment to the Malian state, the French turned to a co-option strategy as a stopgap measure to defeat jihadist groups in the north. With few French and Chadian troops to secure gains, the secular MNLA was given control over large areas around cities of Gao and

Kidal. Fearing revenge attacks on the Tuareg population, the French did not permit the deployment of Malian Army units, most of which are of Bambara ethnicity, into the northern-most areas. While France may see the exclusion of Malian forces from operations in the north and cooperation with the once-separatist MNLA as military necessities, this strategy has jeopardized Bamako's claims to the north and may have already planted the seed of a future Tuareg revolt. Despite pressure from the French, the MNLA has refused to disarm prior to talks with the government and before receiving guarantees of autonomy from the international community. According to the group's chief negotiator, the MNLA is prepared to "fight to the death" if Malian troops enter areas under its control.

The French intervention also had the effect of strengthening the position of the Malian military vis-à-vis the civilian government. The Malian Army is now stronger politically, as it is receiving aid from the French and it has the perfect enemy in the north to justify its predominance. Empowerment of the army may well have reduced chances for a political settlement with the Tuareg, as the army, buoyed by French soldiers and aid, now has little incentive to enter into meaningful negotiations.

Prospects for a political settlement

There is nearly universal agreement that there is no going back to the political status quo that existed in the 1990s and that the lauded democracy in Mali was, in fact, deeply and irredeemably flawed. There is widespread pessimism about the prospects for successful elections in July. Because of the existing divisions within the country, the chances of negotiating and implementing a peace accord are slim. Furthermore, the atrocities committed by all sides have reduced the likelihood that a national consensus will develop in the immediate future.

It will also be difficult for the Bambara-dominated government and the Tuareg in the north to achieve a political settlement. The current "caretaker government" has no real legitimacy or power and has little incentive to address the difficult question of northern autonomy. The Tuareg are also in a poor position to enter negotiations. They do not speak with one voice, and they are divided along tribal, generational, and ideological lines. The MNLA, which now controls territory in the

north, does not represent the entire Tuareg population and is blamed by many for starting the current crisis. Some Tuareg, particularly from the Imghad and Kel Antessar, have stayed loyal to the Malian government.

A new debate on political Islam brought on by the current crisis (a discussion started in the 1990s with the arrival of the South Asian Islamist movement Tablighi Jama'at) may also complicate a return to democratic governance. The political-religious discourse currently occurring in Mali may increase public support for alternatives to the secular state, a system which is seen by many as corrupt and ineffective. More disconcerting is the support, albeit very limited, for jihadi movements where virtually none existed in previous years.

Recommendations for the international community

Conference participants agreed that a counterterrorism strategy in Mali will not succeed without political reforms in Bamako. However, the international community working in Mali faces a number of seemingly intractable problems on the governance front. National elections are no panacea, and participants warned that if attempted too early they will likely cause more harm than good. Currently, ethnic divisions are so deep that a political solution will be nearly impossible unless a new social contract is negotiated. While the situation in Mali is too complex to suggest a master plan, participants provided the following recommendations as starting points for a way forward:

- **Stronger international focus is needed on the political process.** The resolution of the conflict in Mali will require some sort of national consensus and the negotiation of a new social contract. Progress in the north will require a government in Bamako that has widespread support and is able to negotiate with northern communities and insurgent groups. It will be important for the government to have sufficient legitimacy to be able to begin the politically difficult process of addressing the Tuareg's demand for greater autonomy. Observers fear that a botched election in July not only would fail to confer legitimacy to a new government, but also could quickly lead to another bout of unrest. Therefore, despite the desperate need for better governance, the international community should not press

for a rushed political process that does not permit the inclusion of all Malian political actors.

- **The international community must stay engaged in Mali over the long term.** The international community lacks a longstanding presence in Mali, and thus has not been able to develop in-depth knowledge of local actors and political dynamics. Understanding has been impeded by a lack of reliable information on what is happening on the ground. This ignorance has hampered the ability of the international community to effectively target aid. In the past, misspent aid money has had negative political ramifications. The international community should invest in civilian, vice military, personnel who could work in Mali over the long term, build trust with local actors and institutions, and distribute small amounts of aid in a targeted and ultimately more effective manner.
- **The international community and, in particular, regional partners should assist the Malian government in starting a reconciliation process with the Tuareg in the north.** The Tuareg retain the potential to pose a widespread threat to civil order and internal security. Resentments between the Tuareg and other ethnic groups in Mali go back decades, stemming from atrocities committed by both sides in multiple conflicts. The international community should pressure the Malian government to begin a dialogue with Tuareg leaders that addresses the disaffected northern population's grievances and begins a process of reconciliation. As a starting point, and according to France's defense minister, Jean-Yves le Drian, "Tuareg specificity" should be recognized by the Malian government. The ultimate goal of such an effort would be to promote a sense of citizenship among Mali's Tuareg.
- **Coordination of regional efforts must be improved in order to prevent the spread of an Islamist insurgency.** Analysts and observers fear that the French operation in Mali will inadvertently compound problems elsewhere in North Africa. Porous borders have made controlling the flow of fighters in and out of Mali exceedingly difficult, despite the assistance of French and American surveillance drones. Groups of individuals suspected of belonging to Islamist forces have been spotted in Niger and Burkina Faso. In particular, southern Libya has been cited as

one of the jihadists' chief areas of shelter. The international community should assist regional governments in improving border security and stemming the flow of arms and fighters.

- **Diminishing the influence of the coup plotters within the military establishment will be a necessary step toward political reform.** The Malian military need to be reformed from the ground up, not just trained and equipped. The Malian Army leadership is currently fractured between the old guard and the younger members who instigated the coup. This fissure has complicated attempts by the international community to push the military towards a more moderate role, in support of the civilian government.

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